

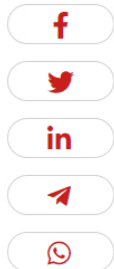


Kidnapped, Beaten and Ransomed in Post-Crackdown Sihanoukville

1 May 2023 10:19 PM | Cindy Liu | Jack Brook



Xing Tian Di Casino in Sihanoukville. (Google Maps)



Before Ko found himself kidnapped, beaten and handcuffed to a bed in a Sihanoukville casino, with survival contingent on delivering his armed captors \$120,000 in the next 12 days, the 53-year-old Taiwanese national had responded to a Facebook ad promising a “customer service” job last year, he recalled.

After being sold multiple times over the past year, Ko had been freed in March only to quickly become entrapped again inside the newly licensed Xing Tian Di casino owned by well-connected businessman Rithy Raksmei’s K99 Group.

“I wasn’t afraid they would kill me there because I knew they wanted the money,” Ko told CamboJA over the phone Wednesday from a Sihanoukville immigration center after his rescue. He requested only his surname be published for his safety.

The details of Ko’s kidnapping and rescue were publicly reported by National Police on April 24. His case, one of several reported kidnapping and extortion cases in the past six weeks, comes despite a government-touted crackdown on scam operations and human trafficking in Sihanoukville. But Ko’s account of his captivity over the past year suggests that criminal activity has far from ceased in Sihanoukville, where reports of suspicious deaths, violence and scam rings continue to emerge.

“Right after [the September crackdowns] happened the compounds did make some changes, but as more time has passed and it seems people have forgotten, the companies are slowly returning to their previous ways of operating,” Ko said. “They might be afraid to buy and sell people now, but companies are slowly starting to detain and restrict people’s freedom again.”

During the apparent height of the scam industry’s open operations in the Kingdom, when Ko traveled to Cambodia in June 2022, he said he believed he would be doing customer service.

“I wasn’t suspicious at the time,” he recalled. “I didn’t know I’d been sold until I arrived in Sihanoukville.”

He was first sent to Crown compound on Sihanoukville’s National Road 4, where his passport was confiscated and he was told he had been sold for \$15,000. A month later, he was sent to a compound known to him as Huang Le 3 and forced to sign a contract owing

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\$20,000 to a company called Bao Ying.

The company had around 400 to 500 people and targeted Chinese nationals and foreigners with pig butchering scams, Ponzi investment schemes, peer to peer fraud and crypto wallet theft, Ko recalled.

Amidst widespread raids and crackdowns on known compounds across Sihanoukville in September 2022, Ko was transferred hurriedly overnight to a compound in Pailin, near the border with Thailand.

“We were suddenly told to gather everything and waited until 1 or 2 a.m.,” he said. “There was a minibus and a big bus. Everyone who had debt was moved.”

In November 2022, Ko returned to Sihanoukville when he was sold to **Bolai Casino**, which held around 200 to 300 people at the time and by February, he had been sold again to **Jinbei 4**. By the end of March, Ko’s boss told him he was no longer in debt and could come and go from the compound – or pursue other work opportunities – if he wanted.

“I’d only received \$1,500 in salary since arriving in Cambodia,” Ko said. “I didn’t have any money on me to go back to Taiwan.”

Desperate to make some money to return home, Ko met a man nicknamed “Ah Jun” at Xing Tian Di casino near Sihanoukville’s Chinatown to “check out a work opportunity” suggested to him by a friend.

After arriving at the Xing Tian Di casino on April 6, Ko said he was brought to an office on the third floor when a group of around seven people surrounded him, herding him down the hall past offices containing around 200 people. He never learned if their company was connected to the extortion group.

Ko’s captors forced him into a smaller room on the same floor. They made him fingerprint a rudimentary debt slip stating he owed \$126,700 and ordered him to immediately contact his family for the money.

Two Cambodian guards then brought him to room 715 on the 7th floor. He was placed inside a small dorm-like room with two metal bunk beds with an adjoining larger room, where the two guards kept watch.

“At least one of them was watching me at all times,” Ko said. “I saw them loading and unloading bullets into their handguns.”

Ko stalled for several days, saying his family needed time to come up with the large sum. On the night of April 10, an older Chinese boss and a group of about 10 people came and “took turns beating me up,” said Ko, who lay face down on the floor as they pummeled him.

The boss pointed a gun at Ko’s head and forced him to sign a more detailed debt slip with his passport information.

“[The debt slip] said I had to give them \$10,000 a day for 12 bank business days starting on April 12,” Ko recalled.

On the nights of April 11 and 12, Ko was handcuffed to a metal bed.

“It was difficult to lie down or turn over,” he said.

But his captors allowed him to keep his phone to gather money from his family. Ko was able to contact a Cambodian friend who alerted authorities on April 12. Ko then risked a call to the Chinese embassy on the morning of April 13, confirming his identity. Cambodian police arrived by the afternoon. Once at the police station, he contacted Taiwanese authorities. An officer from Taiwan’s Criminal Investigation Bureau confirmed Ko’s case.

Ko’s case was only one of several trafficking cases reportedly occurring in Sihanoukville and other parts of Cambodia in April. The Cambodia China Times reported several other cases of human trafficking, not all of which could be independently confirmed by Cambodian authorities.

On April 5, police **rescued six Chinese** nationals from Triumph International who allegedly sought help via Interior Minister Sar Kheng’s hotline, leading to the arrests of two Chinese

nationals for illegal detention, human trafficking and illegal possession of firearms.

On April 13, five Chinese men were **arrested** for handcuffing another Chinese national to a stair-rail inside a home as they attempted to extort money from him in Sihanoukville, police provincial **reported**.

On April 24, eight Vietnamese were **arrested** for detaining 10 people at “Shanghai Resort” casino in Svay Rieng province.

The previous month, three Chinese nationals fell from buildings in Sihanoukville over the course of one week, **including** from a building which appeared to be the Nanhai International Hotel and Casino, where **scam operations** have been well-documented. The other two buildings were the **LZ Seaview Residence** and the **Lay Jus Hotel**.

Permanent vice-chair of the National Committee for Counter Trafficking Chou Bun Eng acknowledged that crimes in Sihanoukville and connected to the online scam industry are still happening and explained that the criminal networks were well-structured and international.

“It is still happening in places, and we also continue to crackdown,” she said. “They may think we forget after the previous crackdown, so sometimes they return to commit the crime at the same compound.”

Last year, in-depth media reports by **Propublica** and **Al Jazeera** identified buildings owned by the K99 Group as harboring scam operations.

Bun Eng said police would determine if compound owners should face charges because police implemented the law, while she focused on gathering data.

National Police spokesperson Chhay Kim Khoeun did not respond to requests for comment.

Preah Sihanouk deputy governor Long Dimanche, whose administration recently blasted as **“baseless”** a BBC documentary exposing human trafficking and scam operations in Sihanoukville, said he could not comment on the prevalence of criminal gangs in the city.

“It is the technical work of the police, so I have no information for this,” Dimanche said.

Two Cambodian nationals, Sun Chantha and Chhorn Thea, were brought into custody after they were allegedly found guarding the victim, along with Chinese national Lu Ke (also known as Bao Ge), according to a National Police report.

Preah Sihanouk provincial police chief Choun Narin confirmed Ko’s case and said that the suspects had rented rooms inside the Xing Tian Di casino, and that police officials had already arrested the offenders.

When asked if prominent businessman Rithy Raksmei — **identified by name** as the compound’s owner by police — would face legal consequences, Narin did not answer directly.

“If you want to know clearly, please come to meet with me, I do not have time to explain through telephone,” he said.

Raksmei is the brother of Rithy Samnang, the deceased son-in-law of Senator Kok An.

CamboJA contacted the number listed on Xing Tian Di casino’s ministry of commerce registration, but the man who answered claimed to have once been Raksmei’s driver. He said that the casino had “already closed and stopped operations since Covid-19” even though its license was recently renewed.

The same number is listed for many of Raksmei’s registered businesses.

Raksmei and K-99 Group have made many donations to Cambodian authorities over the years, including three ambulances and 5,000 cases of pure water to Preah Sihanouk Provincial Administration, according to the administration’s **Facebook page**.

Raksmei’s operations expanded even as police raided a building he owned. Flanked by the head of the Royal Gendarmerie Sao Sokha and Preah Sihanouk’s governor Kuoch Chamroeun, Raksmei **cut the ribbon** for the opening of the Khemarak Hotel on April 12,

Cyber Scam Monitor **first reported**. Ko lay handcuffed to a bed at Raksmei's neighboring casino that same day.

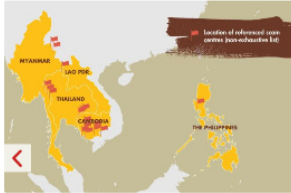
In an April 24 **statement** on Ko's kidnapping, police said that they would "continue to search for the mastermind..."

(Additional reporting by Khuon Narim and by Eung Sea)

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Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association

+ (855) 23 88 23 11

editor@cambojanews.com

#19, St. 388, Sangkat Tuol Svay Prey I, Khan Boeung Keng Kang, Phnom Penh.

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